

Special Contribution

Living for Scholarship and Slow Violence in the Academy

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Professor Andrea Pető closes her keynote with a provocative question to consider: are we willing to die for the freedom of science? I have a hard time demanding that any of us die for an idea, so I'd like to frame my brief comments around the idea of living for scholarship, and the question of *what kind* of scholarship.

In my response, I want to emphasize the link between: 1) the kind of environment that Professor Pető identifies as a new “battlefield for socialization in the Gramscian sense” in terms of facing off against a contemporary anti-gender movement born at a moment of nationalist neoconservative responses to the crisis of the global neoliberal order; and 2) the increasingly precarious, increasingly neoliberal university context in which we attempt to formulate our responses.

That is to say, there are different kinds of violence that we can face as scholars. As Professor Pető discusses, we risk threats of violence from online trolls when we publicly discuss our work, particularly when our work emphasizes the constructed and hierarchical nature of what many would prefer to understand as essential and “normal.” But we also work within university contexts that often perform a slow violence upon the increasingly contingent workforce that teaches and researches at those institutions. If the former terrifies through the menace of hypervisible claims to violence, the latter wears away at many of us and our colleagues hidden from view through slick university websites, brochures, and also through a hustle culture in which we feel the pressure to project our most “productive” (cruelly optimistic?) versions

of ourselves.¹

This often invisible and slow violence sometimes becomes rendered visible, often prompted by the occasional high-profile tragedy that befalls a precarious researcher. A recent example in Japan has been the suicide of Nishimura Ryo on February 2, 2016, which led to some articles on the dire employment situation for academics in Japan. An *Asahi Shimbun* article built around Nishimura's story pointed out the dramatically shrinking chances of secure employment for academics in Japan since the early 1990s ("Researcher's suicide," 2019).

A recent example in the United States has been the death of Thea Hunter in December 2018, from a heart condition almost certainly aggravated by her underemployment stresses and lack of access to healthcare as an adjunct. Thea was close with many people I know (she got her PhD in the History Department at Columbia University, as did I), and many of those people say that they had no idea how much she was struggling. In a sense, that speaks also to the failing health of academic communities under stress as well: many who knew Thea, thought that they knew her well, said that they didn't understand how much her finances and her health were at risk. We all feel so busy ourselves, involved in our own tasks, and it is not an easy atmosphere in which to admit weakness when we have become conditioned to understand our failures as failures of our intellect, not of the system.

In many ways, I feel conflicted about the posthumous articles about both Nishimura and Hunter, which often reveal intimate details about their struggles that I think they worked very hard to conceal. It is uncomfortable to witness the public exposure of their personal cases, although I understand that their cases can help us expose the shameful conditions under which many researchers labor: financial difficulties that make it impossible to conduct the research needed for advancement, teaching to undergraduates who often have

¹ I employ the term "cruel optimism" in the sense that Lauren Berlant means it: as desire for something actually harmful, and as a central affect of neoliberal society (Berlant, 2011).

no idea about the stratified employment at their institutions, and a wage pieced together from gigs at several institutions – gigs that could go through at any given semester. In the United States form of employment also precludes access to affordable healthcare.

However, the individual specificity of their cases also helps us think about how precarity is unevenly distributed. Nishimura and Hunter were both academic women, and the circumstances of their academic troubles were shaped by their experiences as women.

In the *Asahi Shimbun* article on Nishimura Ryo, one academic noted that the hiring process may have been particularly difficult for her as a woman (“Researcher’s suicide,” 2019). Apparently, Nishimura figured that getting married would “open an emergency door” (as she told her parents), which fits in with the dominant heteronormative framing of marriage as a private form of a social safety net for women in Japan. It didn’t work, and the night of the day on which she filed her divorce papers she killed herself.

A recent research article on the effects of non-regular work on women’s health noted that, at 52%, “the rate of non-regular employment for researchers in universities and research institutions is higher than that for general workers” (Inoue, Nishikitani, and Tsurugano, 2016, p. 8). But the data also suggests “that the majority of female researchers work their entire career in precarious employment situations such as part-time lecturing and postdoctoral fellowships” (Inoue, Nishikitani, and Tsurugano, 2016, p. 9). While universities in Japan do hire a relatively high rate of female researchers, “the proportion of permanent employees who are women declines with higher job classifications: 31.6% of lecturers, 23.2% of associate professors, and 15% of professors are women” (Inoue, Nishikitani, and Tsurugano, 2016, p. 8-9). Surveys by Union of University Part-Time Lecturers in Japan also found that, “the majority of female part-time lecturers held multiple fragmented jobs to maintain their careers” (Inoue, Nishikitani, and Tsurugano, 2016, p. 9). In short, over half of academic workers in Japan work without long-term job security,

and very few female academic workers make it into the higher ranks of university departments.

The study concluded that female part-time workers in academia faced issues similar to women in precarious employment in other fields (“psychosomatic stress resulting from life events such as marriage and childbirth, and poor social security”), but also “several interacting factors are thought to be relevant to the specific situation of researchers. These include: the lack of a secure, favorable research environment, which directly affects the ability to plan a career trajectory; the disturbing lack of transparency in human resources and exclusive employment systems for researchers; and, the prevalence of overt gender discrimination in the male-centric ‘research community’ (at least, many female researchers feel this way)” (Inoue, Nishikitani, and Tsurugano, 2016, p. 10). The researchers concluded that there is a strongly gendered dynamic to the experience of precarity in academia, in which stresses common among women in precarious employment are compounded for women in academia by a masculinist culture. Since academic reputations and careers are built not only on the day-to-day administrative tasks of an academic job, but also through planning, conducting, and publishing one’s own research, a lack of support for one’s research in terms of stability and also a “male-centric ‘research community’” almost certainly contributes to the decreasing percentage of women who work their way into the highest academic ranks.

In the case of Thea Hunter in the United States, Hunter was an African-American woman. Although there is an idea one hears sometimes that the only people who get jobs in academia in the United States now are those who can improve the diversity profile of a university faculty, the truth is that while previously marginalized groups now have more access to academic training and work, a 2016 report on faculty diversity from the TIAA Institute also noted that at the same time “the opportunity structure for academic careers has been turned on its head” – secure employment is more and more rare (Harris, 2019).

That means that the percentage of underrepresented minorities who work in academia overall has increased, but the rates at which it has increased is very different depending on if the work is secure or not. Underrepresented minorities in full-time tenure-track positions went up 30 percent, but their employment in non-tenure-track part-time positions went up much more: by 230 percent (Harris, 2019).

These individual stories need to be positioned within the larger structures of academia, and we need to formulate collective responses to the kind of slow violence from which both Nishimura and Hunter died – a violence I believe is connected to the more general devaluing of education in a context in which political ideologies win out over critical thinking and in which the value of a human is defined by their contribution to some economic standard or ideal. This means that we need to think about academia as a workplace, and how to protect academics as workers. This also means that we have already certain tools available to us that have been forged by labor movements in their long history: collective organization and bargaining, for example.

It is interesting that Professor Pető mentions an 18 November 2018 information and solidarity strike in Budapest as an event that forced a wider conversation about gender studies. A strike interrupts flows of what those in power see as critical: a strike contains the potential to disrupt economy and money in a way that, as Professor Pető pointed out, petitions, signatures, public protests do not. Indeed, when I first met her in October 2018 in Budapest and suggested drafting some kind of letter or petition of solidarity with academics in Japan, she rejected that as a relatively toothless action. She emphasized strengthening networks and sharing information and strategies for action. This symposium is an attempt to act on her advice.

The strike is a labor-based strategy for collective demands. I'd like to urge us to think about the status of the universities – about our own work and our workplaces – and how they figure both in the larger, global political context of what the Academics for Peace Germany call “the scientific truth-shadowing

of the extreme right,” and which they also identify as linked with various kinds of precarity – kinds of precarity that, as scholars of gender, we have an obligation to witness, critique, and fight (“Workshop on precarious academia in Frankfurt,” 2019).

Part of this work is sharing our stories and building critiques and strategies together. I’m interested in how Prof. Petó’s framework of the polypore state might be something to interrogate the formulation of the contemporary Japanese state, which also seems – like Hungary – to wed right-wing cultural politics and values with neoliberal economic interests: whereas a common critique of liberalism (as historically conceived and frequently still implemented) is that its insistence upon individual liberties undervalues collectives and communities and conflates social freedoms with the existence of a “free market,” the reconfigurations we see today in Orbán’s “illiberal democracy” or in Abe’s free-market evolution with far-right roots are responding to neoliberal excesses (which *should* be countered), but their reactions insist upon reaffirming “traditional” national and family values (familialism and security) while also freeing the market. They advocate for implementation of strong governance in some senses (state security), and a hollowing-out of government (regulation, oversight, welfare) in other senses.

So what is our role—as workers within a workplace both critical to knowledge formation and implicated in social hierarchies—within this larger context? How can we forge international solidarities but also local solidarities across rank and the full-time/part-time academic divide? I think it makes sense to try to understand this issue in academia as scholars of gender, and to think about how gendered ideologies intersect with these and other hierarchies to push through reactionary political agendas. And I think we can understand the actions of the Hungarian government as a kind of acknowledgement of the potential danger we may pose to states and institutions that would like to obscure and mystify their actions as a return to “traditional values.” I hope that our collective discussions here can open up onto more collective projects

and discussions that don't just demand more work of us, but also support us and make it possible for us to live for our scholarship.

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